

## Perceptions of ‘Best Friend’ as Expressed by Preschool Children in Turkey and in Sweden\*

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### Abstract

The research examines the concepts of ‘friendship’ and ‘best friend’ among preschool children (n=52) who live in different countries (Sweden and Turkey), with the aim of presenting their ideas about the concepts of ‘friendship’ and ‘best friend’. For this purpose, 52 children, 4-5 year olds (25 from Turkey and 27 from Sweden) participated in semi-structured interviews, the content of which was later analysed. A content analysis method included the identification of codes that could be used for comparison across the two populations through statistical analysis. The main results of our study show that, despite the fact that preschools are organized differently in Sweden and Turkey, children from both populations used prosocial behaviour and their perceptions about what a best friend is more similar between children in these different cultures than they are different.

**Keywords:** Early Childhood, Preschool Children, Best Friend, Friendship

**DOI:** 10.29329/ijpe.2021.366.24

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\* This study was presented as an oral presentation at the 70th OMEP World Assembly and International Conference on 27-29 June 2018.

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## INTRODUCTION

Today's increasing internationalization of many societies places high demands on people's ability to understand and live up to the values that derive from cultural diversity (Skolverket, 2018). In this context, we ask the following questions concerning the concepts of 'friendship' and 'best friend' from a cross-cultural perspective: Do children have different concepts about what 'friendship' and 'best friend' can be? Does having a different cultural background determine how teachers and other staff who work with children at the preschool stage (as well as the children's parents) entertain different ideas about potential differences between the child's conception of 'friendship'? We wish to examine what perceptions about 'friendship' children who live in Turkey and Sweden have. We are curious to discover whether any cross-cultural differences can be identified or whether, no matter what their cultural background may be, children are more similar to each other in this regard than previously known? The preschool context of the child's development instantiates an important social- and cultural meeting place that should promote the child's understanding of the value of diversity. An awareness of different living conditions and cultures can help to develop in the child an ability to understand and empathize with other people's conditions and values.

The nuclear family, relatives, neighbours, teachers, and peers all create and inform the child's environment. The relationships that are established with these adults and their peers are slightly different in structure. The relationships that the child establishes with peers progress in terms of a number of more 'natural' processes and give rise to different results. These different learning experiences with its peers provide support to the socialization process of the child.

After the immediate environment of the nuclear family, the first social environment that the child encounters is at kindergarten, and the first socialized group in which they are involved is their peers. Peer relations are generally performed in groups of individuals who share a similar age, similar levels of development, a similar social environment, and similar interests (Wellman, Phillips, & Rodriguez, 2003; Gülay, 2010). In order to interpret the understanding of the kindergarten children that instantiate our two population groups and the peer relationships that these children enter into, it is necessary to first identify the basic features of the preschool education programs in the two countries where our research data was collected.

The Swedish preschool curriculum (see Lpfö/18) is primarily informed by notions of democracy. One important task of this curriculum is to lay the foundation for (and establish) the values on which a democratic society rests. Furthermore, this curriculum follows UN Convention on Children's Right. The values that the preschool environment should instil in each child include: "The inviolability of human life, the individual's freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between the sexes and solidarity with weak and vulnerable." At the preschool stage of their development, children should experience the feeling of being an asset to the group and that the group that the child is a member of is seen as an important and active part in child development and learning. Early childhood education at the Swedish preschool stage consists of a combination of learning and play, and a care for and fostering of fundamental values. Play is considered to be important for each child's development, learning, and well-being by the curriculum (Lpfö/18). Teachers are thus tasked to provide support to children as they develop their own ideas and experiences in a collaborative environment (Puskas & Andersson, 2017).

The Turkish preschool education program was updated in 2013, and has become a more child- and process-centred program. In this new education program, principles such as *democratic understanding*, *activities based on play*, development of the child's *problem-solving skills* and *creativity*, and the notion of children as *respectful* and *self-controlled individuals* are highlighted. Some of the other principles of the program which can be related friendship are the development of "feelings and behaviours of children such as love, respect, cooperation, responsibility, tolerance, solidarity and sharing" and the notion that "children should be encouraged to recognize themselves and others' feelings" (MEB, 2013).

There exist a multitude of theories and approaches that attempt to explain the importance of peer relations. According to Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, social relations and linguistic communication, both of which are associated with action, are the most important driving force in the child's social-, cognitive-, and emotional development. An important starting point in Vygotsky's theory is the view of the individual as a social actor who is involved in the creation of themselves.

Vygotsky also highlighted the importance of the effects of cultural elements on human behaviour, the human mind, and culture. According to his theory, cultural elements affect basic mental processes, including perception, memory, attention. It is also argued that high mental processes arise from the development of basic mental processes. Play constitutes a key element of his theory, and is considered to be the most important way in which children come to understand the world and their culture (Vygotsky, 1978). As the child grows and develops, the faculty of speech also takes on different functions and becomes a means of communicating with the child's self-understanding and with concepts, in addition to being a means of communication with others. The child's peers are very important for social speech and intersectional conversation, and comprises an important step in the development of verbal thinking (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Bjorklund, 2005).

The Indirect reinforcement concept of the 'social learning theory' which has an important role in explaining the importance of peer relations, (Bandura & Walters, 1977) enables the child to learn indirectly through observing the consequences of the behaviours that their peers display. By means of indirect reinforcement, a great deal of the child's behaviour is established through modelling its peers. The child who observes behaviours that are accepted and strengthened in friendship relations, will begin to display similar behaviours. In this way, the foundations of socialization and friendship relations are laid among peers (Bandura, 1999; 2002; Woodrow, 2001; Gülay, 2010). Unlike family relationships (such as those instantiated by the child's father, mother, brother, sister, etc.), a friendship relationship does not develop automatically, by itself (Greve, 2007). Friendship is a mutual relationship that requires both parties to be volunteer to and approve of the relationship. A friendship relationship requires intimacy, the sharing of feelings (not only positive feelings but also negative feelings), and companionship (Dunn, 2004). The relationship that initially begins as a mere peer relationship for children evolves into a friendship relationship through play.

Play helps us, to develop our social sides and interactional skills with others. Parten (1932) a pioneer in the study of socialization amongst peers, observed that play behaviour develops in a systematic order. Similar to Parten's work, Piaget (1969) and Smilansky (1968) developed theories about play which show that play develops in parallel with the child's cognitive development, and moves from simple play (like throwing an object) to complex play (for example, as manifest in symbolic play). A point common to all play theories is the claim that play has an important role in the development of the socialization of the child and, thus, the friendship relationships that the child enters into. Play is also an important tool for both presenting and acquiring empathy, one of the essential skills for friendship (Nergaard,2020).

Children benefit from kindergarten education up to the ages of 6 or 7. In this process, they develop their various play behaviours, in concert with their peers. Therefore, they find themselves in a context where they can engage in parallel play, playing together, or in cooperative play. As the time spent by the child at kindergarten increases, she develops a close relationship with her peers and begins to form the concept of 'friendship' (Hwang & Nilsson, 2011) Play and friendship is a double-sided mechanism for children. Children play games with their friends, whilst simultaneously developing their friendship relationships by playing games (Corsaro, 2003). A friendship relationship entails a special relationship between two children who are characterized by possessing a mutual liking of each other (Asher, Parker, & Walker, 1998; Ladd & Kockenderfer, 1998). The process of friendship, which seems to develop naturally and spontaneously, requires the existence of different elements. These include social competence (which allows for sustainability by establishing positive relationships), emotional competence (the child's ability to recognize emotions and respond to displays of emotion appropriately), and positive social behaviour (behaviour that aims to benefit

others). In addition, factors such as gender preference, common interests, temperament, culture, and the environment play an important role in the child's friendship preferences (Staub, 1978; Hay, Payne, & Chadwick, 2004; Ağzıbüyük, 2008; Gülay, 2010).

Hartrup (1999) draws a distinction between children's companionship and friendship. A 'friend', or 'friendship', is defined as a relationship between individuals who share a community together. At preschool, it is natural that different peer relations and friendships arise between children. Bukowski, Newcombe, and Hartrup (1998) state that children choose whom they want to be with. They seek out each other for joint play or other activities. Friendship, in itself, creates a positive context for the child's development and growth. Friends stand up for each other and give support if the other is sad or something bad happens. Even quite small children can comfort each other if someone is crying (Ashen & Rose, 1997). Sandell (1999) highlights the fact that it is important for preschools to create an environment that favours the establishment and maintenance of the child's friendship relations because friendship is important for the child's development. In general, children are good at interacting with one or more peers, for shorter or longer periods (Corsaro, 1982), but in their effort to establish their place within their community of peers, children develop closer relationships with certain other children, as characterised by being 'best friends' with a limited number of other children (Corsaro, 1985; Sandell, 1999).

Corsaro's (1981) research has shown that the meaning of friendship for children at preschool is *to do things together in a certain way and within a certain area*. Bukowski, Newcomb, and Hartup's (1998) study describes friendship from the individual's perspective; as a mutual relationship that must meet three basic social needs: partnership, intimacy, and affection.

The conditions for establishing and preserving friendships are assumed (Howes, 1998) to be the same, regardless of the person's age, but the approach and forms of expression that the friendship relationship takes on differ depending on whether young children or whether adults are under consideration. Small children are dependent on the help of adults to establish and care for their friendships -- something that older children and adults usually do for themselves (Howes, 1998). As mentioned above, whilst children are quite skilled at interacting with one or more peers for shorter or longer periods (Corsaro, 1981; Olofsson, 1992), in their attempts to find a safe place in their community, children develop closer relationships, such as friendship, to a limited number of other children whom they play and work with regularly (Corsaro, 1985; Sandell, 1999).

Although there are studies that have dealt with the concept of 'friendship' from different perspectives (Corsaro, 1979; Howes, 1988; Johansson, 1999; Ailwood, 2003; Greve, 2007; Jónsdóttir, 2007; Engdahl, 2012), there is no current research that has investigated the concept of 'best friend' by taking with the preschool child's voice into account. The present paper purposefully includes the voices of children who live in different countries (Sweden and Turkey), as we present their ideas about the concepts of 'best friend' and 'friendship'.

### **Research aim**

The aim of the present study is to investigate children's perceptions of the concept of 'best friend', as expressed by 4-5-year-old children who live in Turkey and Sweden. To achieve this general aim, we ask the following research questions:

- How do 4-5-year-old children who live in Turkey express their understanding of the concept of 'best friend'?
- How do 4-5-year-old children who live in Sweden express their understanding of the concept of 'best friend'?

- What are the similarities and differences between 4-5 year-olds who live in Turkey and in Sweden?

## METHOD

Our study of the opinions of 4-5-year-old children who live in Turkey and Sweden employs a qualitative research methodology and a cross-cultural perspective. Qualitative research prioritizes the explanation of social phenomena in the context in which they occur (Merriam, 2009; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). The interview method, which is the one of the main methods of qualitative research, is used in this study. According to Stewart and Cash (2010), the interview method entails a predetermined process that involves interference and communication. These are achieved by asking and answering questions. The aim of the interviewer is to enter the interviewee's inner world and to comprehend their perspective (Patton, 1987). The data that was obtained in this study was sorted across a number of different codes by authors and was analysed using the content analysis method. Content analysis entails summarizing and interpreting data that is collected by means of interviews or observed. Content analysis is a systematic and repeatable method that enables texts consisting of many words to be transformed into content categories based on certain rules (Mayring, 2004).

### Study group

The study group included in this research consisted of 52 children in total: 25 Turkish children (21 five-year-olds, 4 four-year-olds) and 27 Swedish children (22 five-year-olds, 5 four-year-olds). A randomized cluster sampling method was used in order to determine the membership of the study group. 3 preschools in Turkey, and 2 preschools in Sweden were selected. Ethical approval was obtained from the Hacettepe University's Ethics Committee prior to data collection. In addition to the ethical approval, informed consent forms were submitted to 215 families in Turkey and 52 families in Sweden to obtain permission from the families to allow these children to participate in the study. Further to this, permission was obtained from the relevant school administrations and teachers. After their submission of the informed consent forms, the children who participated in the study were provided with a brief explanation concerning the study before the children whose families granted permission for their participation in the study were interviewed. The children and families were informed that any child could leave the study at any time, if the child so wished. The interviews were conducted after verbal consent regarding their participation in the study was granted by each child. After setting these conditions and obtaining all the necessary permissions, 52 children (25 from Turkey and 27 from Sweden) were interviewed. Since this study is primarily aimed at identifying children's perceptions regarding the concept of 'best friends', specific demographic data was not collected during the course of the study. On the other hand, it was discovered by the researchers that the gender distribution across the two groups of children was found to be similar.

### Data Collection Tools

A semi-structured interview form consisting of 4 questions was used as the primary data collection tool. The questions used in the study were written in English, since this language is understood by the authors and much of the literature on this topic is in English. Furthermore, three experts in this field were consulted, experts who were both familiar with working in English and had produced previous studies in the area under investigation. These experts provided their opinions regarding the questions that were included in the semi-structured interview form questions. After receiving feedbacks, the semi-structured interview form questions were finalized. At this point, the questions were translated into both Turkish and Swedish and then re-translated back into English, in order to obtain some level of linguistic equivalence.

### Data Collection Period and Analysis

The authors referred to the semi-structured interview form questions during their face-to-face interviews with the participating children. The interviews lasted between 5-10 minutes and conducted in a designated room that is smaller than the room that was usually used by the children during their preschool day. The responsible preschool teachers escorted each child to the interview room, one-by-one. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed by the authors. This was done in order to not distract the child’s attention and to prevent the potential loss of data which note-taking may incur during an interview. These transcriptions were then subject to our analysis. We employed a content analysis method, a qualitative research method. Content analysis allows for an understanding of the data obtained during the research process according to the identification of common relationships (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). The data that was collected for the study was read several times by the authors individually, who then identified individual codes within the material. The codes that were identified by the individual authors were then shared with all of the other authors. Subsequent to this, a set of codes common to the research data was agreed on by the authors. The authors establishing a consensus amongst themselves regarding the themes that these codes represented. The present study draws a number of comparisons between the participating children’s perception of ‘friendship’ and ‘best friend’ in Sweden and Turkey. To this aim, we employed a statistical analysis of the interview data. After the content analysis was completed, all of the codes were loaded into SPSS. The participating children were coded as ‘t-1’ and ‘t-2’ (and so on) for the Turkish study group, and ‘s-1’ and ‘s-2’ (and so one) for the Swedish study group.

### Validity and Reliability

The informed consent forms that were provided to the children’s families explained that all of the participants’ personal information would be kept confidential and private. Voice recordings were made of the interviews and these records were transcribed precisely; thereby preventing data loss. In order to provide internal validity amongst the group of researchers who were involved in the study, each researcher carried out their own pilot study and several points of agreement amongst the researchers were taken into consideration. To increase reliability in the research data analysis process and to provide consistency amongst the researchers, each researcher formulated a set of codes w.r.t. the data set individually, including the identification of themes. In order to increase the reliability of the study, a number of extracts from the interview transcripts are provided in instances where it was thought that they would make the results of the study more comprehensible to the reader.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we present a number of examples of the short answers that the children provided during the interviews. These examples are presented and discussed as a part of the present study’s result, together with frequencies.

**Table 1. The children’s opinions about the concept of ‘best friend’**

Codes	TURKEY		SWEDEN	
	4 years old (f)	5 yearsold (f)	4 years old (f)	5 yearsold (f)
Love/Like	1	7	1	4
Play	1	3	2	1
				2
Help				1
Kind				4
Funny or Have Fun				2
Don’t Know		2	1	2
Happy		2		2
Mate	1			1
Share		2		
Be Good		2		
OTHERS (the perfect one, a	1	3	4	

friend, spiderman, Kerem, Demir)				
Total	4	21	5	22

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In Table 1, the concept of 'best friend' is associated with expressions made by the children during the interviews. As indicated in the table, frequently used expression in Turkey referred to 'Love/Like' ( $f = 8$ ), whilst 'Play' ( $f = 14$ ) was the most frequent in Sweden. In general, when all of the responses that were provided by the children are examined, we note that the concept of 'best friend' invokes associations with positive emotions and behaviours in children.

Below, we provide a number of examples of the children's answers to the question: "What does it mean to be best friends?"

*My favourite friend.* (t7, 4 years old)

*He is your best friend who treats you best.* (t23, 5 years old)

*Very nice to share.* (t14, 5 years old)

*You have a friend you love.* (s1, 4 years old)

*That they are kind you can play with.* (s13, 5 years old)

*Someone you play a lot with, that is a good friend.* (s25, 5 years old)

A number of prosocial behaviours, including *like*, *love*, *share*, *fun*, *kind* and *play* are common to being a best friend in both countries. Swedish children mostly focused on *playing with one's best friend* with respect to best friends. This result is in agreement with current discussions of friendship in the literature. This is the case because, to determine the mutual friendships of preschool children, the sociometer methods that are used in the literature invoke similar sets of questions. For example, these may include questions which identify: (1) three peers with whom they most liked to play with, and (2) three peers with whom they did not like to play/liked least (Asher, Singleton, Tinsley, & Hymel, 1979). In parallel with the results of the present study, Büyükbiçer and Ulutaş (2018) found in their study of preschool children (which also employed a semi-structured interview technique) that close friends enjoyed playing the same games together. The Turkish children conceptualization of being best friends primarily invoked feelings such as *love* or *like*. These findings are congruent with the results of several previous studies. Nergaard (2020) found that children's expectations from 'friendship' is someone that understand their feelings, trustworthy, they will connect with and play together. According to Lindsey and Berks (2019), the children who they worked with children expressed more emotions (both positive and negative) when interacting with friends than with other acquaintances. Children at preschool and at home from the infancy years in Sweden are taught to learn by playing. Consequently, they choose their friends within this framework of action. Playing is the most important way of learning at Swedish preschool. If we look at the situation in Turkey, the more common responses to what constitutes a best friend are expressed in terms of feelings. This is thought to be a result of a cultural difference. Turkish children often use sentences about *sharing* for defining what a best friend is for them. This could be the result of the fact that Turkish teachers frequently remind their pupils that *sharing is good*, a behaviour that is directly informed by Turkish cultural values.

**Table 2. Children has how many best friends**

	TURKEY		SWEDEN	
	4 years old (f)	5 years old (f)	4 years old (f)	5 years old
One Friend's Name	2	18	3	1
Two Names	1			5
Three Names		3		4
More Than Three	1			
Everyone			1	1
Others (Can't Choose, Switch Between Two Names, All)			1	2
Total	4	21	5	22

In Table 2, most of the children in both countries chose to have one best friend among all their other friends.

The following illustrate the type of answers that the children provided when they were asked “Who is your best friend?”:

*Zehra and Kerem Yiğitkara* (t10, 4years old)

*Deniz Su* (t8, 5 years old)

*Esin* (t18, 5 years old)

*All/every one* (s9, 4 years old)

*Svea* (s24, 5 years old)

*Ellie and mother's cousin Tina* (s1, 5 years old)

We note that, in most cases, the children have the ability to choose who their best friend is, in either country. Most of them had one friend in mind. This indicates that the children in both countries can differentiate between their best friends and other friends in terms of emotional, social, and cognitive aspects, from the age of four. This observation is supported by van Hoogdalem et al. (2012), who state that, instead of making random choices among their peers in the classroom with respect to who they are to play games with or communicate with, children clearly show a preference for certain children within their group. Our survey revealed that most of the children in both countries choose a best friend who is of the same sex as they are. Similarly, in a different study conducted with children aged 5-6, it was found that children attach a certain importance to gender similarity in their best friends (Wang, Palonen, Hurme, & Kinos, 2019). In the study conducted by Wang et al., they claim that children's friendship ties, that is, their relationships with children with whom they are best friends, stabilize over time and tend to crystallize. It is thus argued that children seek out stable and mutual relationships, rather than expanding their peer networks. Park and Park (2016) found that children can maintain their friendship ties consistently over a five-month period. According to Proulx and Poulin (2013), maintaining a relationship with at least one friend throughout the school year seems to be important for children in kindergarten. In all these studies, the importance of close friendships that are established in early childhood is emphasized. Entering into stable peer relationships is expressed as being key to creating a participatory culture, since such relationships ensure the child's psychological- and social well-being in their transition to primary school (Finnish National Board of Education 2016).



**Table 3. Instances of conflict with best friends**

	TURKEY		SWEDEN	
	4 years old (f)	5 years old (f)	4 years old (f)	5 years old (f)
Never/No	3	10	4	16
Sometimes		3		3
Yes	1	8	1	1
Others (Afred, Greta)				2
Total	4	21	5	22

In Table 3, most of the children in both countries stated that they had not experienced conflict with their best friends. However, we note that more Turkish children (f = 9) reported that they had experienced conflict with their best friend than the Swedish children who participated in the study (f = 2).

Below, we provide a number of the children’s answers to the question “Do you bother/fight with your best friend?”:

*Sometimes. We make peace by not doing it again and apologizing. (t3, 4 years old)*

*No, it never happens. (t1, 5 years old)*

*Never. Mmmmmm just once. We make peace by playing. If you do not like the behaviour of your friend you should tell her. If she does it again you should leave the place and go to the teacher. (t12, 5 years old)*

*No, Matteus used to fight and if he does not stop you must get a teacher. (s2, 4 years old)*

*No. (s7, 5 years old)*

*Sometimes. (s26, 5 year old)*

The Turkish children responded more frequently with a positive answer to the question of whether they had experienced conflict with their best friend than the Swedish children who participated in the study. In Turkey, the schools which participated in the study have in place a conflict resolution program, as indicated by some of the Turkish children’s answers. For example, *If you do not like the behaviour of your friend you should tell her. If she does it again you should leave the place and go to the teacher. (t12, 5 years old)*. The existence of such a conflict resolution program may inform the children’s answers to the question of whether they had experienced conflict with their best friend. It is important to note that many researchers in this area define two dimensions that are related to friendship. The first dimension of friendship refers to concepts such as ‘cohesion’, ‘positive social behaviour’, ‘reliability’, and ‘warmth’. The second one refers to ‘conflict’. There is some evidence that many children’s perceptions of the concept of ‘friendship’ include both dimensions, for example, ‘intimacy’ and ‘conflict’ (Daniels, Quigley, Menard, & Spence, 2010). In a number of studies, it has been claimed that friendship and peer relationships are important in resolving conflicts and disputes (Corsaro, 1994; Evaldsson, 2003; Kyratzis & Guo, 2001; Martinez-Lozano, Sánchez-Medina, & Goudena, 2011; Poveda & Marcos, 2005). According to Corsaro (2015), the common interpretation in all these research findings is that the importance of friendship and peer relations with respect to conflict and dispute resolution is due to the fact that friendship is a collective and cultural process.

**Table 4. Children’s play**

	TURKEY		SWEDEN	
	4 years old (f)	5 years old (f)	4 years old (f)	5 years old (f)
Dramatic Games	1	13	3	1
Sports Games	1	2		6
Digital Games		1		1
Manipulative Games	1	3	3	4
Street Games	2	9		6
Art Games		1	1	5
Others		2	1	7
Total	4	21	5	22

In Table 4, it is reported that Swedish children play Dramatic Games (f = 19), Digital Games (f =4), Manipulative Games (f = 9) and Art Games (f = 8) more frequently than the Turkish children who participated in the study. The Turkish children reported that they prefer playing Outdoor Games and Sport Games (f = 11) more frequently than the Swedish children.

Some examples of the children’s answers to the question “What play and games do you do with your best friend/ friends?” are provided below:

*Playing house, playing cat, we are being two cats, or one of us owns a cat. (t7, 4 years old)*

*Playing house, playing being doctor, playing doing dentist. (t11, 5 years old)*

*We play all the games, make some games ourselves and play. (t22, 5 years old)*

*Playing hut. (s23, 4 years old)*

*Snowball war, thief and police, building with Lego, figures, everything. (s19, 5 years old)*

*Family nook, drawing. (s26, 5 years old)*

Every Swedish preschool child has an iPad. And even families with a low income also own an iPad and/or a computer. In Sweden, these items are relatively cheap to buy, but if a family does not have the means to buy such things for the child, then the preschool will compensate for that. Because all children in preschool must learn to use digital tools due to the curriculum (Lpfö-18). Consequently, Swedish children at preschools use these learning tools more frequently than Turkish children. Most children play Dramatic Games, Outdoor Games, and Manipulative Games in either country. This can be explained in accordance with the development process. At the time when the interviews were conducted in Sweden, it was winter-time and so it was very cold with plenty of snow outside. This placed a certain limitation on the study. In contrast, in Turkey, the interviews were conducted at another time of the year, and this with different weather conditions. If we had collected the data during the spring in both countries, then different responses to the interview questions may well have been offered up by the participating children. In agreement with the results of the present study, the importance of play in friendship relationships during the preschool period is also frequently emphasized in the literature. The friendship relations that emerge during the preschool period are mostly evident in games that are structured in terms of binary participation, in small groups, or in fantasy games. Working in the area inclusive early childhood education, Watson (2019) states that children who play with their peers and establish friendship relationships in early childhood are seen as a developmentally ‘normal’, an expected situation. While it is accepted that those who play with their peers develop normally, those who play alone or who play differently are positioned as ‘other’ (Watson, 2019). In mid-childhood, friendships are based on shared norms and personal qualities. As a

function of growing interpersonal awareness, they are based on intimate, dual exchanges with friendships, openness, honesty, and compassion in adolescence (Bigelow, 1977; Parker & Gottman, 1989). In summary, (and as explained by sociocultural theory), children's social-emotional and cognitive development in activities and games with their peers is extremely important because it supports peer learning (Bodrova & Leong, 2007).

## LIMITATIONS

The approach of our study is qualitative, but certain problems were encountered because the young children who participated in the study mostly responded with short answers, sometimes just single words, thereby limiting the creation of a flowing narrative. These short answers provided us with but limited opportunity to compare the children between the two countries. For this reason we used quantitative measurements for the comparison of the two population groups.

Further limitations to this study can be attributed to the fact that different researchers conducted the interviews in the two different countries, in different preschools contexts, and at different times of the year and preschools are organized differently in the two countries (OECD, 2017). The different types of play and games that the children engaged in were sometimes difficult to interpret, but the authors solved this issue collaboratively. In spite of these limitations, the children's perception about what a 'best friend' is seems to be quite similar.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

In summary, similar results regarding the perception of the concept 'best friend' were obtained in both countries. One of the most important result of the study is the observation that children always have good emotional and behavioural thinking about their best friend. Every relationship is unique and, therefore, preschool teachers should protect and take care of the friendships that emerge between children at preschool. One question we must ask ourselves: Is it possible to compare children's perception between children living in different countries? This question addresses potential differences, not only between different countries, but also between different cultures, family traditions, and social standards, both in the home and at preschool. In the introduction, we highlighted the existence of our globalized world with multicultural societies and the question of whether we are as different from each other as some might think. Optimistically, the results of the present study, notwithstanding the fact that this is a small-scale investigation, show that, no matter what culture and context they live in, children who live in different countries are more similar to each other with respect to their understanding of the concept 'best friend' than they are different to each other. We call for further studies on this issue.

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